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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 001562

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AF/S FOR BNEULING
NSC FOR SENIOR AFRICA DIRECTOR C. COURVILLE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KPAO](#) [ZI](#) [MDC](#)

SUBJECT: ZIMBABWE'S ELECTION SPACE OPENING?

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher W. Dell under Section 1.5 b/d

1. (C) SUMMARY: MDC Secretary for Presidential Affairs Gandhi Mudzingwa told poloff on September 14 that the party was finding it easier to conduct rallies around the country, although no-go areas remained. In a surprise move, Mudzingwa said Election Registrar General Mudede had agreed to share with the MDC an electronic copy of the voter rolls, which would facilitate the party's preparations for the national parliamentary elections should they choose to participate. Finally, the GOZ has suggested publicly that it would take measures to afford the opposition greater access to the state media, a development Mudzingwa said the party planned to exploit. END SUMMARY.

Party Rallies

2. (C) Mudzingwa reported that MDC President Morgan Tsvangirai and other party leaders had conducted successful

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rallies during the past week in Harare, Gweru, and other locales. Additional rallies were scheduled soon in Bulawayo, Mutare, and Masvingo. After denying MDC public meeting applications for weeks, police had granted the party blanket authority to hold rallies in Manicaland for a month. (Comment: Contentious territory dominated by the MDC in the last parliamentary elections, Manicaland this year has seen concerted ruling party efforts to suppress the opposition, including the violent seizure of MDC MP Roy Bennett's farm and the forcible eviction of the MDC mayor of Mutare from his office. End comment.)

3. (C) Mudzingwa went into detail on the party's experience in Hwedza, a fairly remote venue in rural Mashonaland East, as representative of the improved but still mixed treatment the party was getting from authorities. When a regional party representative pursued a permit to hold a rally in Hwedza, he was told several times by police officials that it was not &your territory8 and that his safety could not be guaranteed. Party officials had complained of this and similar rebuffs elsewhere to their Central Intelligence Office (CIO) liaison and were told to keep trying. Subsequently, police convened a &peace meeting8 involving representatives from both parties in Hwedza and then issued a permit for the rally.

4. (C) On the eve of the Hwedza rally, ruling party supporters beat opposition supporters and threatened local people with reprisals if they failed to attend a ZANU-PF rally scheduled for the same time. ZANU-PF youths abducted and beat two activists, dumping one of the victims at a police station. Nonetheless, the MDC rally came off successfully, according to Mudzingwa. Police dispersed ruling party youths who wanted to disrupt the meeting. To date, none of the MDC supporters had experienced reprisals customarily associated with similar circumstances. Police protection continued to be uneven, however, and MDC supporters had to disperse disruptive war vets without police assistance in a similar situation in Bikita. Many areas remained no-go areas, with police emphasizing their inability to guarantee the safety of a meeting, refusing to issue permits, or arresting those trying to meet without a permit.

State Media Opening?

5. (C) Mudzingwa also reported that the party's CIO liaison recently indicated that the MDC party would be given access to the state media. According to state radio on September 15, the GOZ was drawing up guidelines for opposition access to state media. Mudzingwa said the MDC planned soon to seek advertising in the official Herald newspaper. It would later press to get airtime on broadcast media.

MDC Preparing for Election Campaign

6. (C) According to Mudzingwa, the MDC was going &full blast8 in preparations for the election, should the boycott be called off. The party was engaging in a membership drive,

consolidating local structures, and conducting campaign training. It had completed primaries or other processes in connection with the selection of candidates for nearly all MP constituencies.

17. (C) Mudzingwa advised that Election Registrar General Mudede had agreed to share with the MDC an electronic copy of the entire national voter rolls. The party was raising the ZD 12 million (about USD 2000) required to cover costs of the copy. The roll would permit the opposition to conduct voter registration audits as well as audits of its own registered membership.

Talks on Talks Scotched

18. (C) Mudzingwa confirmed press reports that Minister for Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Patrick Chinamasa and MDC Secretary-General Welshman Ncube had cut off informal interparty discussions on constitutional amendments to restructure the government, including the introduction of a bicameral parliament and elimination of presidentially appointed &non-constituency8 members of parliament. He shared with poloff a copy of the draft legislation to support the amendments, which he said could be the departure point for resumed discussions should the parties choose.

Comment

18. (C) It would be premature to attach too much significance to these apparently positive developments. ZANU-PF likely intends the opening of campaign space and media access to offer cover for SADC endorsement of its March election, a high ruling party priority. That said, if granted, access to voter rolls)- a central component of election transparency and integrity missing in the last election)- would represent concrete progress in the election environment. Suspension of informal discussions on constitutional amendments probably represents a tactical move by each party to step back in the wake of the MDC's publicized boycott announcement.

19. (C) These developments present the MDC with an opportunity and a challenge. The party leadership hopes to exploit the opening of campaign space and channels of communication to energize a moribund support base that has grown apathetic and disillusioned. Improvement of the election environment affords the party a face-saving option to participate in the election, even if it could not win. Participation in a flawed process might confer greater legitimacy to a ruling party victory (according to the terms of the MDC,s conditional boycott) but is also more likely to assure the party,s survival to contest another day.
Dell